Stratified maternity in the barrio

Mothers and children in Argentine social programmes[1]

Valeria Llobet and Nara Milanich

Are feminist goals and children's rights necessarily at odds? Diverse fields of academic practice have tended to respond in the affirmative. Scholarship ranging from the gender and development literature to feminist scholarship on carework and reproductive labour emphasises the tension between women and children embedded in social policy design, in which children represent a burden of care for their mothers.[2] As feminists have noted, historical child welfare practices, and more recently the rhetoric of the 'best interests of the child', have often undermined the interests of women.[3] The children's rights literature has paid little attention to women's interests; it renders them invisible or, worse, actively obfuscates them by treating women only as mothers.[4] Feminists have noted how certain children's rights approaches emphasise the practical contradiction between children's care and women's autonomy and how certain child's-rights approaches lead to anti-feminist postures.[5]

Nowhere is this tension more evident than in the antipoverty social policies known as Conditional Cash Transfers, or CCTs. At the turn of the millennium, CCTs became the centrepiece of regimes of social protection in Latin America, which cast aside notions of social rights and labour protection and embraced instead a focus on poverty and 'the poor'. The programmes expanded rapidly, such that by 2011 they covered an estimated 129 million people in the region.[6] Adopted in at least 18 countries in Latin America, they were also exported to Asia and Africa.

CCT programmes do precisely what their name suggests: they pay out monthly cash transfers to poor families who meet certain conditions. Those conditions involve behaviours related to childrearing, such as ensuring that children are vaccinated and attend school. CCT programmes may also require *contraprestaciones*, or 'workfare' participation, in which recipients contribute labour to community initiatives or attend educational workshops in exchange for benefits. The CCTs' objectives are thus twofold: first, by increasing the poor household's immediate resources, they boost consumption, decrease material insecurity and ameliorate poverty in the moment. Second, in the longer run, they seek to incentivise poor households to invest in 'human capital' through the health and education of their children, thereby attempting to halt the propagation of intergenerational poverty.

The CCTs are an excellent example of what scholars have referred to as the 'maternalisation' of welfare policy. It is mothers who usually receive the cash payments, and it is also mothers who are responsible for ensuring that the programme's conditionalities are met, since it is they who, it is assumed, are in charge of children's medical care and school attendance. Women are also the targeted workforce for the *contraprestaciones*, which tend to involve 'feminine' labours such as working in neighbourhood childcare centres, soup kitchens, clothing drives etc. Finally, they are the intended audience of the educational workshops that CCTs often require recipients to attend: these cover parenting, reproductive rights and other 'female' topics.

CCT programmes have attracted myriad critiques, but none more trenchant than those of feminist social scientists. According to these critics, CCTs treat poor women as the privileged, but subordinated, interlocutors of the state. The emphasis on intergenerational poverty alleviation makes children the privileged targets of policy; women are positioned as mothers, and as mothers, they are narrowly conceived of as the conduits through whom inputs, interventions and resources are channelled to children (themselves narrowly conceived of as citizens-in-the-making).[7] The CCTs are thus a classic example of a maternalist social policy that subordinates women in the name of children's well-being. Not only do they privilege the perceived needs and interests of children as future citizen-workers over and above those of women, but they tend to sacrifice women's immediate well-being, rights, and citizenship, as well as gender equity generally, in the service of their child-focused project.

The sphere of social protection has been a privileged space for debates about women's autonomy insofar as the architecture of welfare programmes powerfully, although usually implicitly, expresses

policy makers' ideas about gender. Certainly this is true in the case of CCT programmes. Indeed, they appear to constitute an especially transparent, real-world example of the tensions between the rights and interests of women and children. In this paper, we treat the CCTs as an opportunity to examine these tensions. We take as given the problematic consequences of the maternalisation of anti-poverty policy identified by feminists but then ask two questions: are these tensions intrinsic to the design of these programmes, and do women recipients themselves share this assessment? Given the sheer reach of CCT policies, the numbers of individuals affected by them across Latin America and beyond and their status as the darling of both former leftist 'pink tide' governments in the region and global neoliberal regimes of social protection, it would seem particularly urgent to assess these issues within this particular policy intervention. But the lessons that emerge from our analysis are not necessarily specific to the CCTs and may be relevant to other social policies as well.

Summary of the arguments

This paper explores these questions through data drawn from CCT programs in Argentina in the mid-2000s. We agree with the feminist critique that CCTs fail to reconcile intergenerational mechanisms of social protection with gender equality. However, we posit a more complex relationship between the labour, welfare and rights of poor women and those of their children by examining what might be called the micro-social dynamics at work in the lives, households and communities of CCT recipients. We argue that what critics frame as tensions between women's and children's interests are not necessarily perceived as such by women themselves. This is because certain scenarios and activities that critics have understood to be burdensome or disadvantageous may be understood by the recipients as strategically useful or valuable.

Our analysis looks at the CCTs as they enter the field of neighbourhood social relations and cultural habitus. This perspective reveals the unanticipated and heretofore unacknowledged meanings that certain resources, responsibilities and indeed motherhood itself acquire in this context. These meanings complicate any simple understanding of CCTs as pitting children's welfare against that of their mothers. Motherhood is associated with labour but also potentially with social recognition and status. The maternalised interventions of the CCTs demand the time and labour of poor women but also create a stage for them to perform maternity upon, as a way of obtaining status and resources. Meanwhile, children require work and consume resources, but in the cultural and policy habitus of poor neighbourhoods they may also generate strategic opportunities for their mothers.

We begin by highlighting the sociohistorical density of the contexts in which CCTs are implemented. 'The poor' are not a homogeneous block, contrary to what both the targeting mechanisms of the programmes themselves and the laudatory and critical analyses of the programmes' performance tend to assume. Rather, CCTs are incorporated into complex social landscapes, characterised by relations of hierarchy, solidarity, status and intimacy. As such, there is a need to consider the micro-social or experiential politics of CCTs, that is, the ways these resources are absorbed into the pre-existing hierarchies of gender, class, community and status that the recipients inhabit, and the meanings that they acquire in this context.

In this vein, we suggest that the CCTs' consequences for women – embodied in the required *contraprestaciones* as well as in the cash transfers themselves – cannot be assessed solely in terms of money or time. As recipients incorporate these new forms of work responsibility and income into their lives, they develop meanings that are simultaneously material, social and moral. Taking these meanings into consideration allows us to understand in a more nuanced way both how these policies reproduce gender inequalities and how gender inequalities intersect with other social relations.[8] Our focus, then, is not on the relationship between the state and beneficiary, as in the case of most analyses of the CCTs. Rather we focus on relationships between recipients, their family members and the wider community.

Second, and relatedly, we suggest that CCT recipients must be recognised simultaneously as members of families and of communities. We argue that the traditional emphasis of the policies on women-as-mothers redounds on social relations and networks *outside* the family as well as within. The resources and responsibilities associated with CCTs acquire meaning in the context of quotidian neighbourhood relations, particularly between women. 'Mother' is not merely a private or familial identity; it is expressed or actualised in public spaces and in extra-familial social relations as well. It is a role that provides opportunities for creating networks and affinities, and for ascribing meanings

and value to certain relationships and activities. In the context of the community-based *contraprestaciones*, the extra-familial reach of maternity can be experienced as a burden for women but also as a resource through which women build social recognition and social networks for their own benefit, albeit in a restricted or limited manner. As such, the unit of analysis for assessing the gendered implications of these programmes should be broadened to include not just the household –the typical focus of CCT assessments – but the community.

The foregoing analysis prompts a re-evaluation of the role not only of mothers but also of children. First, the presence of children in the household facilitates access to public and state resources for their families. Children may serve as intermediaries or interfaces between their families and the state agencies that are crucial for accessing rights and material goods. Second, and perhaps even more importantly, children represent sources of symbolic and affective capital that their mothers actively mobilise. While we are accustomed to thinking of children as either 'useful' (providing labour) or 'precious' (having sentimental value but representing a drain on others' labour, especially that of their mothers),[9] precious children in this context are also social and cultural assets. That is, 'preciousness' itself may be useful to adults, particularly to their mothers.

This analysis is very much an exploratory exercise, one that aims to be more suggestive than conclusive. It draws on 27 semi-structured interviews with CCT recipients, mostly female but a few male, conducted in three urban locations within Greater Buenos Aires in the years 2006–7. At the time of the interviews, the informants were recipients of the first two CCT programmes in Argentina, the Plan Jefes y Jefas de Hogar Desocupados and, in a few instances, the Plan Familias (described below). The interviews were conducted in six workfare locations, including childcare centres, NGOs, schools and churches.

The data has some notable weaknesses. Besides the modest sample size, the interviews were conducted for other purposes, namely, in conjunction with studies evaluating the impact of the cash transfers and the value of the educational workshops for recipients. Therefore, they did not deliberately or consistently address the themes discussed here. Discussions of childcare strategies, for example, emerged only fortuitously. The fairly long interviews (each about an hour in length) tended to develop somewhat organically and did not always cover the same ground. Moreover, they provide much more insight into women's perceptions of the workfare programs and considerably less about their uses of the cash transfers. Our analysis therefore focuses on workfare, although in the conclusion we review the limited data concerning income and find similar dynamics of meaning-making. An additional concern is the extent to which the nature and purpose of the interviews influenced the women's remarks. Informants may not have felt fully comfortable articulating critiques of social programs of which they were recipients. Moreover, given the extensive presence of child protection authorities in these communities, they may have been careful to talk about their children and childrearing in ways that conformed to the norms propounded by these authorities. Finally, these sources do not allow us to access children's perceptions and perspectives on their practices at all.

Despite these drawbacks, the interviews evinced certain patterns that we believe are worth highlighting, not least because they seemed to complicate some conventional wisdom concerning the CCTs' impact on recipients. Indeed, the recurrence of certain themes in interviews designed for quite different purposes is itself potentially revelatory.

The dynamics we highlight concerning the relationship between women, children and social policy emerge out of a very specific social context, namely the poor, peripheral barrios of greater metropolitan Buenos Aires at the dawn of the twenty-first century. We make no claim for the universality of these dynamics. What we *are* making a claim for is the importance, in assessing the relationship between feminism and the politics of childhood, of attending to local processes of meaning-making and the ways that the immediate material, political and ideological context shapes these processes.

A brief overview of Conditional Cash Transfer programmes in Argentina

In Argentina, the first conditional cash transfer programme was the Plan Jefes y Jefas de Hogar Desocupados (PJJHD), or Programme for Unemployed Male and Female Household Heads. Initiated in 2002 in the wake of the dire political, financial and economic crisis in which the government

resigned and half of the population sank into poverty, the programme targeted unemployed heads of households. The PJJHD differed from similar CCT programs in Brazil and Mexico in that it benefited unemployed household heads regardless of sex. Still, approximately 70 per cent of the recipients were women. In exchange for the cash transfer (a monthly payment of Argentinian $150 (US $75)), recipients were required to perform 20 hours of community work per week or to participate in educational workshops. They also received economic support in order to finish elementary school. The programme reached an estimated 1.5 to 1.8 million recipients by 2003.

In 2005/6, the PJJHD was replaced by the Seguro de Desempleo y Formación, or Unemployment Insurance, and Plan Familias (PF). This new programme organised recipients according to a highly gendered criterion: those deemed able to work (in practice, mainly men) were given unemployment stipends and reorganised in cooperative work projects, whereas those deemed unemployable (typically women with dependent children) received the PF, which provided mothers with cash transfers dependent on family size. The programme thus incentivised economic inactivity among women, thereby re-inscribing the distinction between male worker and female housewife. In addition, the PF redefined the central problem requiring intervention. Whereas the PJJH had identified the problem as unemployment, the PF defined it as the poverty of female-headed households. Accordingly, the *contraprestación*, which had previously centred on employment training and female community work, now came to focus on the human development of children. In particular, recipients were required to ensure children's school attendance and health visits as a condition of their benefits. The programme also incorporated workshops for mothers on themes related to childcare (nutrition, early childhood development, adolescent challenges, etc.), sexual health and domestic and gender violence. The programme came to cover some two million children before being phased out in 2009,[10] when it was replaced by another CCT programme.

Profile of the recipients: the heterogeneities of poverty

According to data culled from programme evaluations, 57 per cent of PJJH recipients had received only an elementary education (and 20 per cent of those had never completed primary school), 68 per cent had worked in low- or no-skill jobs, and almost a quarter of the women had no work experience outside the home at all. The majority of those with labour experience had worked in domestic service; work in industrial or administrative jobs was also (though to a lesser extent) common.[11] While receiving the PJJH benefits, about a third of women were involved in informal economic activities or petty commerce, including clothing and shoe repair and scavenging for bottles and recyclable cardboard (*cartoneo*), in addition to domestic service.[12] Almost half of the women considered themselves to be 'housewives' (rather than 'heads of household'), meaning the principal household income came from their male partners and the women themselves had not worked in income-generating employment prior to receiving the transfers. In general, the women who had never participated in the labour market were younger and had younger children than women with prior labour market experience.[13]

In terms of educational attainment and labour experience, the recipients in our sample were broadly representative of the general population of CCT recipients: they had little schooling and those who had worked outside the home had primarily done so in domestic service. Yet a generic characterisation of the recipients as poor, uneducated or unskilled tends to obscure certain heterogeneities among them. Specifically, it is possible to distinguish two distinct subsets of households in somewhat different conditions, one more self-sufficient (accounting for roughly three quarters of the women), the other much more vulnerable (about one quarter of the group). The first group consists of those households with ties to the labour market and with more than one member of the household producing income. The second, more vulnerable group had larger numbers of dependent members and little participation in the formal labour market. For them, the financial assistance of the cash transfers constituted the only stable income the households received, although they were living in a monetised economy. The distinction between the two groups rests less on absolute material conditions and more on their distinct social and occupational genealogies, which result in different strategies of household reproduction. As we will see, these differences shape the CCTs and the meanings assigned to them.

The first group was composed of women who tended to self-identify as 'wives' (*esposas*) or 'homemakers' (*amas de casa*). The 'homemakers' were mainly co-resident with male partners, and

their strategies of income generation were based primarily on domestic tasks in their own homes or, sporadically, in the homes of others (including sewing, preparing and selling food, etc.), but some of these women had previous experience in industries or the public sector in low-skill jobs. The children of these women participated in household reproductive activities only within their own homes (assisting with cooking and cleaning, caring for siblings, etc.) and contributed their own income to the household only at a much later age.

The second, more vulnerable group was comprised of women on their own with several children, with employment histories linked exclusively to informal and unstable work as domestic help or in scavenging. Many of them were internal migrants; their social networks were restricted, and their formal schooling was even more limited than the general beneficiary population (indeed, some of the women were illiterate). Such women mobilised all of their children in strategies of household survival.

Beyond these broad sociological profiles, myriad emic hierarchies marked the micro-politics of barrio life. Women residents constructed social gradations based on a series of attributes including age, sexual behaviour, maternal practices, domesticity and status as an established resident or a newcomer.

Stratified maternity in barrio life

The heterogeneities of poor women are reflected in distinct practices of maternal carework. Indeed, maternity itself is a criterion of social and moral hierarchy: some mothering behaviours are valorised while others are condemned. Not surprisingly, such judgments issue from the higher-status group, but significantly, they also take the form of self-evaluations on the part of the more vulnerable women. As we will see, the income from the CCTs as well as the *contraprestaciones* are grafted onto these distinctions. The new resources and responsibilities associated with the programmes do not create these hierarchies of maternity, but they do seem to reiterate and perhaps reinscribe them.[14]

Women in the barrio organise carework according to distinct criteria and with distinct goals in mind, according to the resources at their disposal and their strategies of household reproduction. Those with greater resources (educational, social and material) tend to organise care around a central guiding preoccupation: to guarantee the best education possible to their children, and more social capital. For example, these women may send children to more distant or less accessible schools (as does Andrea, who pays for a cab every day to send her three children to a faraway school) under the premise that this will permit the children 'to mix with another kind of people'. In other instances, it may involve paying for private or semi-private schools. This is the case for Mirta and Cristina, who send their children to private schools to ensure educational quality and requisite number of instructional days. As Cristina says: 'here in the barrio many things are missing and if you want children to have all the days of instruction that they need, you have to send them to a private school.'

Meanwhile, more vulnerable women have few opportunities for improving their children's educational opportunities. In these households, children are less subjects of improvement projects than crucial contributors to household survival.[15] As noted above, more vulnerable women must depend on the labour of their children both domestically and in income-generating activities. A migrant of a remote northwest town, Blanca relied on her seven children to assist with scavenging and household labour. Likewise, Nelly, a mother of nine from a small rural town, residing in the home of an uncle, derived her income from scavenging and begging. She would send her oldest son to collect cardboard in the city centre while she stayed in their peripheral neighbourhood with the younger ones.

The women engaged in these activities subtly defended such choices. Nelly asserted that when she brought her children to scavenge for cardboard, she did so because she had nowhere else to leave them: 'I went with the children. Before there was no day care, [where] one can leave the children and go *cartonear* knowing that they are taken care of. We had to bring them with us or leave them at home alone. I brought them with me...It was safer.' In other words, bringing children along reflected not exploitation of their labour or disregard for their well-being, but an expression of maternal responsibility.

Meanwhile, among better-off women, none of the children provided extra income, either as a matter of course or even when the family landed on hard times, although they did perform household tasks. They criticised the strategies of mothers who scavenged for cardboard or participated in street mobilisations (the latter a 'remunerated' activity insofar as protesters sometimes receive gifts or remuneration for their participation) as morally and materially inferior care. Carina notes the risks that children confront when taking part in protests and opines that mothers take advantage of their offspring when they bring them to such events to earn extra money. Andrea, who has observed cardboard scavengers with youngsters in tow late at night out in the streets, asks: 'why do they do that to their children?'

The critique seems to centre on what they perceive as other mothers' instrumental use of their children. In this way, the different roles of children, and associated maternal practices, become a criterion of moral differentiation. As Delia says, there are bad mothers who do not take care of their children; 'being poor is not an excuse'. Better-off women position themselves as devoted mothers and assimilate notions of progress and sacrifice. They may feel they are accountable to middle-class norms of austerity and economic prudence in their approach to material well-being and education, even though they do not have the flexibility (material and social) to perform it.[16]

Such condemnations are issued not only by better-off women but also, significantly, by more vulnerable ones as a form of self-critique. Unable to mobilise an educational project on behalf of their children, these women in a sense see *themselves* as the ones in need of educational intervention. They articulate their own perceived maternal incompetence, as did the cardboard scavenger Nelly, who suggested she required help from the coordinator of the *contraprestación* to stop being 'ignorant'. Such self-critiques were expressed in the course of conversations about the *contraprestaciones*, which publicly showcase relative maternal competency by controlling and critiquing those women considered negligent mothers. It is possible the women experience heightened feelings of incompetence as a result of their incorporation into these new spaces of visibility, or perhaps this is a strategic performance on the part of recipients who believe the co-ordinators of these programs expect such a response. Whatever the reason, as we will see below, the *contraprestaciones* are a new terrain on which maternal stratification plays out.

Ultimately, then, the care of children grants differential moral value to women. The idea of 'taking good care of them' (*tenerlos bien atendidos*) permits women to draw a frontier that they use to establish superiority over others and to mobilise these moral valorisations in the competition for affective and material resources[17] as well as social ones. Women's notion of 'taking good care of them' clearly reflects middle-class cultural repertoires concerning children's care, education and the organisation of domesticity that, in one form or another, have been impressed upon poor women for more than a century.[18]It is noteworthy, however, that while such ideals are disseminated vertically (by agents of the state or other authorities), women express and experience them horizontally, as they compare or are compared to 'other mothers'. Moreover, the meanings of care go beyond its status as unpaid, secondary or contingent labour.

Enter the CCTs: *contraprestaciones* and cash

It is on this social terrain, in which maternal practice is a criterion of moral differentiation, that the CCTs are grafted. For women themselves, these new resources and responsibilities acquired meanings that were not just material but also social and moral. But given the stratified nature of maternity in the barrio, not all women experienced them in the same way. Employment histories, strategies of household sustenance, as well as specific characteristics of the community and neighbourhood shaped their experiences and attitudes towards the *contraprestación*. Meanwhile, their experiences and attitudes did not necessarily square with gendered critiques of the CCTs.

The PJJH provided monthly cash payments in exchange for workfare consisting of 20 hours of weekly labour. Often the work involved service in community childcare centres or soup kitchens as well as in community gardens, street cleaning or other tasks – labours which several women explicitly characterised as 'men's work'. While critics have observed how workfare reinforces gender stereotypes in work assignments, women tended simply to comment on instances in which they were given tasks they considered 'men's work': a fact some found curious or noteworthy, and others disliked.

Another critique is that workfare represents an undue burden on already struggling poor people and is a source of cheap labour for the state. Again, women's experiences did not quite square with this assessment. For many of the 'housewives', the PJJH *contraprestaciones* constituted the first time they had systematically left the home to work and generated the first stable income of their own. Rather than resent these obligations as an additional burden on their time, they tended to talk about why they were preferable to the alternative of paid employment. Specifically, the programmes permitted them to reconcile work outside the household with the care of their children and in this sense gave them a (minimal) margin of choice in terms of the conditions they could demand of employment 'outside the *barrio*'. In this sense, while *contraprestaciones* may well have been an additional burden, women understood them as a favourable alternative to other, even less desirable forms of remunerated work.

Miriam, for example, had always been a housewife. When her husband no longer earned sufficient income from his appliance repair shop, she entered the PJJH. In this context, she considered the *contraprestación* her best option because it was compatible with what she considered to be her primary labour, namely caring for her six children. The *contraprestación* was located in her neighbourhood, which saved her the time and expense of reaching a more distant job; it allowed for flexibility in terms of adapting to her carework; it permitted her to share her carework with other women participants, and to use the resources (food, clothing, etc.) of the social service organisation where she worked. Meanwhile, for many women, the costs – symbolic, social and material – of working in informal jobs and leaving children in the care of elder siblings (usually girls) were higher than accepting the conditionalities associated with the cash transfers.

But some women regarded *contraprestaciones* as more than simply the lesser of two possible burdens. Notably, the conditionalities themselves had certain positive associations. For one, the requirement introduced housewives, whose labours previously occurred in the isolation of their own homes, into a network of neighbourhood women. When asked on whom they relied when in need, most women said their family members, noting that their neighbours were strangers. 'Not to nose around in others' business' and 'being a woman of her house' are common ways of referring to the normative ideal that confines a woman to her own home and family relations. In this very conservative environment, women needed an 'excuse' to get out of their homes. In this context many women appreciated the opportunity afforded by the *contraprestación* for social connections for which they had previously had neither time nor opportunity. 'Women also need to get out a bit...People like to be in company', noted Monica of the isolation of working alone in one's household.

Indeed, many women talked about the *contraprestacion* as an opportunity for a certain form of gendered sociability. 'We get together to talk' was the most usual way of describing the exchanges that occurred in community centres. 'I met a lot of people...I made many girlfriends', noted Marcela of her labour cleaning streets in work gangs. Such sociability was hardly 'idle chatter' but provided women with certain resources and opportunities, psychological and economic. Imelda noted that the *contraprestación* provided the 'companionship' and mutual aid of other women that allowed her to separate from her abusive husband. In some instances, sociability became 'networking' as women parlayed new social relationships into joint economic activities. This was the case for Gladys, a widow who sold weavings made in the *contraprestaciones* in collaboration with her 'new friends'. Others invested in petty commerce (although unstable and short term) with women they had met through workfare. It is a deep irony of this consummately neoliberal contrivance that workfare was experienced by some women as an opportunity for communal exchange and social and affective solidarity.

Meanwhile, the performance of the *contraprestaciones* constituted a means by which to gain social recognition for activities that mobilised and 'improved' their skills as caretakers and mothers. Carina, mother of three, noted that what she learned helped her better care for her children, which earned her new respect from her offspring: 'we sit together and we do homework. Now I can explain to them what they do not understand.' For Nelly, the *contraprestación* 'is my second home', the place where she learned to be a more educated person. 'I changed my personality for good,' she noted.

At the same time, the intimacies and sociabilities associated with *contraprestaciones* could form the basis not just for support, solidarity or self-improvement but also for stratification and control. Recall that the self-critiques of maternal incompetence on the part of more vulnerable women were expressed in the context of *contraprestación* activities. The very act of bringing children into public workfare spaces to care for them generated critiques on the part of more 'experienced' mothers. Children's behaviour was evaluated as a function of the mother's identity, insofar as younger mothers, women on their own, and those who came from the most vulnerable households became objects of critique by others who criticised their childrearing abilities. The *contraprestación* was absorbed into the micro-hierarchies of barrio life.

In 2005/6, with the transition from the PJJH to the Plan Familias, the *contraprestación* was replaced by private carework: recipients were no longer required to work in community projects and henceforth received the cash transfer in exchange for ensuring their children's school attendance and attendance at medical check-ups. But this change, rather than being welcomed as easing their labour burden, acquired for these women a double negative valence. First, it reprivatised work after the experience of communal labour. And second, it created the moral dilemma of receiving pay for something that women considered to be their responsibility as mothers. Lidia, a separated mother of five, found the idea of being told to perform her maternal duties condescending: 'no one has to obligate me to do anything, I already know what I have to do.' In this sense, while removing the workfare requirement decreased women's work load, attending only to this consequence misses the positive valences the old labour requirements had acquired for some women, as well as the negative meanings that accrued to the new, seemingly less burdensome conditionalities.

While the foregoing discussion has focused on the CCTs' workfare conditionalities, it is worth briefly mentioning the touchstone of these programmes, namely, the cash payments themselves. While our data is limited, the evidence suggests that income use, like workfare, reflected the stratified nature of the barrio, acquiring different uses and meanings for the two groups of women. Those with greater access to social and material resources mobilised caretaking ideals as a way to establish a degree of independent license over the transfers, and sometimes even over income generated by men, because women are understood (by themselves as well as by men) as 'naturally understanding the needs of the children'. At the same time, their choices in spending the money were constrained by the dynamics discussed above, in which women judged one another for their choices.

For higher-status women, certain 'middle-class' ideals of childrearing shaped convictions about what constituted appropriate and inappropriate expenditures on children. For instance, Carina expressed the view that CCT money should be used for the goods and supplies required for children to be 'decent' at school – expenditures like shoes, snacks and school uniforms. In this view, spending the payments on superfluous material goods, such as expensive sneakers, was considered morally condemnable. This use of the money, as part of a strategy of investing in and 'improving' children, distinguished this group from the more vulnerable one. For women in a more precarious situation, meanwhile, the transfers were often the principal or even the only source of household income, and the money tended to be spent on basic consumption needs. This was the case for Estela, who worked as a domestic worker and used the money to feed the family since her husband's income from *changas* (odd jobs) did not suffice for their four children.

Conclusion

Critiques of CCTs identify troubling patriarchal assumptions built into the structure of these programmes, and by extension into the state's relationship to poor women. As the critiques suggest, these policies contribute to gender subordination and inequality by positioning women as mothers and naturalising their work as care providers. By making mothers subordinated 'bearers of policy'[19] directed at children, the CCTs both reflect and reinforce the tensions between women's rights and children's rights that the literatures on carework, reproductive labour and children's rights have brought to the fore. We accept these critiques but argue that interviews with CCT recipients from poor Argentine barrios suggest additional dynamics that these assessments do not address or account for. The dynamics we highlight are embedded in the lived experience of social programmes (as opposed to their policy design) and in the social life of maternalism (as opposed to its abstract expression).

While there are most certainly tensions in barrio households and communities, the most salient ones from the perspective of women themselves are not those between mothers and children. Maternal carework is certainly labour, but it is not just labour. Mothers do not experience it exclusively as a burden on their time and autonomy; rather, they mobilise carework for certain strategic ends in accordance with dominant maternal ideologies. Meanwhile, the interviews make clear that we cannot reduce *contraprestaciones* to labour performed or cash transfers to income received. Even when they were required to perform as many as 20 hours of community work weekly, some women – depending on their prior labour biography, household organisation, and specific aspects of the expected work – regarded workfare as a way out of hyper-exploitive informal jobs and even as a way to access social recognition.

As women incorporate these responsibilities and resources into lives situated in heterogeneous contexts of family and community, they acquire meanings and create strategic opportunities. Motherhood is a public identity as well as a familial one, with consequences outside the family as well as within it. Women mobilise motherhood to create status, form or strengthen social networks, garner recognition, and validate and consolidate (frequently conservative) approaches to women's needs and rights. If CCTs position women as mothers, women use this maternalisation instrumentally. If the policy design of the CCTs treats women as passive conduits for children's well-being, recipients themselves do not *act* simply as conduits. The material and ideological resources invested in children-as-citizens may create opportunities for their mothers.[20] In strategically mobilising the state's maternalism for their own ends, barrio women may indeed forgo certain possibilities for autonomy. But they do so in the service of other goals, such as making ends meet and constructing a respectable social position.

Of course, not all women benefit, or benefit to the same degree, from these strategic mobilisations. Maternalisation creates opportunities for assigning moral worth but also for condemning moral shortcomings. For example, the way that women participate in workfare evinces implicit divisions that need to be explored further. But clearly hierarchies between women are based on a complex interplay in which age, sexual behaviour, maternal practices and domesticity come into play.

Such observations suggest the importance of attending to horizontal as well as vertical relations of power. Feminist analyses of welfare policy, including the CCTs, tend to privilege vertical interactions between women and the state. Indeed, the CCT programs are hardly the only state interlocutors with which poor barrio women interact: systems of child rights protection are also omnipresent, giving mothers access to certain institutional resources even as they expose them to additional forms of state regulation. At the same time, our evidence suggests that for recipients, the meanings of the CCTs also derive from horizontal linkages. Women's interactions with partners, children, other family members, community members, and each other ultimately shape the experiences and meanings associated with resources and responsibilities conferred by the state.

What, then, is the analytic takeaway of the preceding discussion? First, we stress what it is *not*. It is not a claim about the relationship between women's and children's interests *tout court*. We do not propose that there are no tensions between these interests, that maternalism is actually 'good', or that in point of fact CCTs are benign policies that empower their female recipients. Rather, the assessments, choices and bargains we highlight pertain to a specific group of women in a specific time and place. Ours is a local case study, and the choices these mothers make, and the meanings they assign to certain resources and responsibilities, have no necessary applicability beyond this particular setting. But embedded in this very limitation is an analytic lesson of broader scope: the lesson that context matters. Social policy in general, and state-sponsored maternalism in particular, can have no meaning in abstraction from the social context in which it is applied.

In the Argentine barrios, children are not only a constraint on women's autonomy, but also a substantive resource. The opposition between the two, which recurs in feminist critiques of the CCTs, is much more a consequence of material and symbolic restrictions that reduce legitimate social roles for lower classes women to the 'good mother' than of any intrinsic opposition.[21] Examining women and children's roles in their immediate social context may help us better understand the many ways in which the social construction of gender and childhood are mutually constitutive, and the ways in which, for better or for worse, the social protection of women is tied to ideologies of childhood.

From the foregoing we may also infer a political lesson. Once again, we stress what the lesson is *not*. The fact that CCT recipients in certain situations express enthusiasm for workfare or actively engage the policy's maternalist design should not be interpreted as vindication of conditional transfers or their gendered, neoliberal logic. Rather, the choices of poor Argentine mothers should be understood to reflect the formidable material constraints, ideological frameworks and disciplinary structures that circumscribe their lives, ranging from limited employment options to scarce opportunities for social recognition. Their choices thus speak not to some intrinsic merit of these programmes but to a strategic calculus based on the conditions of possibility in a manifestly unequal, patriarchal context. Gender equality and children's rights, as decontextualised and abstract discourses, may make invisible certain idiosyncratic patriarchal bargains.[22] We need not accept neoliberalism's romance with self-reliance and co-responsibility to recognise how barrio women may instrumentally mobilise neoliberal maternalism to their own benefit, however limited that benefit may be.

The CCTs and the dynamics they engender reinforce the dominant ideal that treats mothers as responsible for children's well-being. And of course, assigning differential social value to women based on their maternal behaviours is deeply problematic. In these ways, the maternalisation of the CCTs reinforces patriarchy. But while CCTs maternalise welfare, the effects of these policies cannot be read as simply creating or reinforcing a tension between mothers and their children. Rather, the relationship of women's and children's interests must be evaluated on the actual social field – political, material, cultural – on which it plays out.